

Case Study One: Mr. Adkins Social Studies Class
A Lack of Cultural Sensitivity Presents an Opportunity
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A Lack of Cultural Sensitivity Presents an Opportunity

“Mr. Adkins is a first year teacher of social studies in a large metropolitan middle school with diverse cultures representing eleven different languages and national ethnicities including Thailand, Korea, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Bosnia and the United States” (Silvernail, 2013, p. 1). Mr. Adkins’ personal and educational background does not match the diversity found in his students and he did not receive training in cultural or linguistic diversity or sensitivity in his educational training or in his orientation to teaching. In fact, there is no staff development available to teachers on diversity of interpersonal relations or instruction and so Mr. Adkins uses his preferred 95% lecture teaching style, takes his assessments from the textbook, and limits discussion.

During a lecture on United States history from 1945 to 1965, Mr. Adkins shared his personal opinion about the Korean War in response to student questions about the placement of US troops, the details of the Korean conflict, and the culture of the Korean people and the US Military. Students perceived Mr. Adkins comments as strongly negative towards Korean and Japanese people. In an attempt to address student concerns, Mr. Adkins assigned a journaling and interview activity to engage the students and their parents. Unfortunately, the parental response was similar to that of the students, several parents accused Mr. Adkins of having racist views and a discriminatory teaching style. In response to parent concerns expressed to Mr. Adkins and to school administration over the course of several meetings, a veteran teacher was assigned to work with Mr. Adkins as a co-teacher.

Assigning a second teacher to a class is not the most efficient use of resources, and therefore is not a long-term solution to the issues with Mr. Adkins instruction. Moreover, parents

are right to be concerned about the introduction of personal opinion to instruction when the primary method of instruction provides no way for students to differentiate between opinion and fact. This situation begs the question, were there actions the teacher, administration, or school system could have taken to prevent this outcome? Were there actions the teacher or administrators could have taken in the course of planning for instruction, the class period, the structure of the supplementary assignment, or meetings with Mr. Adkins and parents to eliminate the need for the co-teacher and avoid the degradation of the relationship among the teacher, students, parents, and school? What actions can the school administration take to be pro-active and prevent the re-occurrence of similar events by Mr. Adkins or other teachers?

As noted previously, Mr. Adkins' school does not provide a training or staff development in diverse instructional methods or in interpersonal relations with parents, co-workers, or students. This deficit could be perceived as a lack of foresight, a lack of interest, or simply an oversight due to the perception that the diversity found in the student body and the possible diversity in the staff will inherently result in an appreciation of diversity and practice of diversity in the curriculum and school environment.

Unfortunately, failure to inform teachers about the backgrounds of their students and the policies of the school related to respecting and embracing the diversity of the student body, is akin to failing to provide a roster and textbook. In this situation, the teacher was unprepared for possible responses and concerns of students to the topic of the lecture, effective teaching methods and strategies for his students, and for communicating with parents because he had no idea who his students were, how best to teach them, and what the school's priorities were.

There are several things that Mr. Adkins' school administrators or school and district staff development coordinators could have done to prepare him, and other teachers, for the

social, cultural, and instructional environment of the school. First, the school must establish recognition and appreciation of diversity as a priority and provide a variety of explicit instruction and practice to support that policy priority during the orientation process. Second, the school should ensure that teachers are aware of the learning and social cultures in the school and the local community, providing opportunities for new and current teachers to interact with stakeholders, and ensuring that new teachers are partnered with mentors who model the expectations of and best practices found in the school and district. Third, administrators, mentors, and teachers should collaborate to develop teaching and learning methods and strategies that resonate with the diverse backgrounds and preferences of the students and parents to improve effectiveness of instruction. Finally, teachers and administrators should collaborate to develop effective communication skills and mediums to promote timely and effective communication between the school and home communities.

Mr. Adkins' school is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, with eleven different languages spoken in student's homes – in some cases the primary language of the parents may not be English and the student may even be the primary translator for the parents. Some of the students in the school are Korean, a background that is specifically relevant to the topic of Mr. Adkins' lecture that should trigger special notice. If the school placed a priority on appreciation of diversity, it would take explicit actions to ensure that teachers displayed a commitment to that policy priority recognizing that, "Few preservice teacher programs seem to prepare beginning teachers to plan for effective instruction of academically diverse learners (Tomlinson et al., 2003)," and that academic diversity includes, "learning style, gender, culture, and intelligence preferences (individuals' preferences in reasoning)," (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 11). Having diversity as a priority may have led to the development of a Professional Learning

Community that would recognize that “the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure students are taught but to ensure that they learn,” (DuFour, 2005, p. 32). Lecturing presents information, but a reliance on lecture ignores the way most learning takes place – through active involvement.

With diversity as a priority, Mr. Adkins would not only be aware of the common perspectives on his topic, but would have also been taught strategies to make the most of the diverse opinions and questions students were likely to have, as well as having had training on leading group discussions to promote respectful discourse. In fact, such planning and communication methods might be the topic of group discussions in the social studies department or school wide training as views of history, science, and language study vary across the globe. New teacher orientation might include group work and discussion related to the history of the groups that comprise the student body and brainstorming on resources to use to inform teaching. As Eun (2011) states, “When there is a common problem at the school or district level, all interested teachers could get together to form study groups to jointly find a solution. Teachers could also engage in involvement in a process model to collaboratively seek ways to address their current needs and interests” (p. 323). These ongoing activities that directly apply to practice become assimilated into the teacher’s regular practice and improve overall instruction.

An effective orientation and ongoing staff-development program should provide teachers with tools to help them understand students’ culture and its effect on their learning, as Eun (2011) explains:

The first principle of effective professional development implementation in a classroom with students from diverse cultural backgrounds is equipping teachers with the ‘cultural tools’ that could enhance the instruction of these students.[...] Teachers can use the

cultural resources the students bring with them from their homes and communities and use them to develop curriculum units and modules.[...]These cultural resources could mediate the instructional process as teachers build classroom practices to develop new understandings based on students' already existing knowledge. (p. 324-325)

Such professional development should not take place in a vacuum, teachers must work together within structures that differentiate among the needs and abilities of the staff and students in the school. Hedrick (2005) recommends that staff development be tailored for professionals at varied stages of professional development and identifies characteristics of the novice, the apprentice, the practitioner, and the expert, with suggestions for training, collaboration, observation, and self-study at varying points of the continuum (p. 33-37).

If Mr. Adkins was in an on-going mentorship, or had regular collaboration with peers to develop lesson plans, he would have been encouraged to vary his instructional style to include discussions, projects, and other activities that would have helped build his teaching skills and added tools to his cultural toolkit. Observations of his instructional style and classroom dynamic may have led to conversations about the experiences and expectations of students in other courses and suggestions to front-load information to assist students prior to lecture or assignment of journaling and interview activities. Mr. Adkins, along with his PLC might have decided to call or write parents, letting them know about upcoming topics and inviting them to participate in discussions at home, air their concerns privately, or join the class to share their perspectives.

Communication and collaboration among students, teachers, and the community, could have prevented the dictatorial instructional method and cultural deafness that led Mr. Adkins' to be perceived as racist and discriminatory. With regular communication to parents, his assignment of journaling and interviews could have made parents feel more included and valued and been an

ongoing assignment that promoted two or three way conversations on a variety of topics and showing students the variety of points of view in their class and the world. Students could have worked to design interview questions and practiced interviewing one another in class, building their writing and research skills and giving Mr. Adkins' an opportunity to learn the students' perspectives and inform his instruction. Mr. Adkins could have selected video clips from a variety of sources to highlight the diversity of perspectives among historians and students could develop an illustrated timeline of important events in the period, presenting sections on a daily basis as individuals or groups building their analysis skills and giving them opportunities to create and explore. Presentations could be recorded and/or parents could be invited to visit and provide an audience. If students and parents were regularly and respectfully engaged in the process of learning and making meaning it is unlikely that another teacher would be required to co-teach as an intervention and more likely that co-teaching would be a true collaboration.

Mr. Adkins has an opportunity to improve the quality and effectiveness of his teaching, and while his success depends largely on the changes he personally undertakes, the guidance and support of his school community is also a vital component. By setting diversity as a priority, providing explicit instruction, modeling, and ongoing, differentiated, staff development in instructional, cultural, and interpersonal diversity, and building strong diverse and differentiated lines of positive communication among students, parents, teachers, and administrators future incidents can be prevented and Mr. Adkins can move from cautionary tale to success story.

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